

The Church and Risk
Matthew 25:14-30
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Two weeks ago we thought about the man who, for 38 years, was lying beside the pool of Bethzatha in Jerusalem, waiting to be healed. You will recall that Jesus confronted that man and asked him a very curious question: "Do you want to be healed?" We thought then about the possibility that the man really didn't want to be healed: that he had made a bargain with fate and that his efforts to get into the pool were more ritual than authentic attempt. We thought about that in terms of the risks he was unwilling to take - and the fact that Jesus seemed to be demanding precisely that willingness as the condition of healing or wholeness.

I'm going to return today to the same general topic: under a text that is equally familiar to us. The topic itself is one that I seem to address regularly, and if you find it repetitious, I apologize. On the other hand, I think there is none more important. I think the Gospel addresses people in every age a little differently - and I think it is here - at the point of willingness to take risks: at the point of growing and stretching - that the Gospel addresses us most directly.

I stood last week on the spot where John F. Kennedy was assassinated in November of 1963. I was there because the National Staff of the Board of National Missions was meeting in Dallas; and included, as always, a representative of each Synod's National Missions Committee. As I stood on the now infamous "grassy knoll" I reflected on that event seven long years ago - the flood of history that has transpired since - and also the content of the National Staff meetings - which I found related, in a strange way to the assassination of a young and hopeful national leader. John F. Kennedy, and in a sense - the entire Kennedy family - beyond their particular political stances, have demonstrated to this nation a great lesson: namely, that nothing significant is accomplished apart from tremendous personal risk.

In any case, I thought of the man and his brother - and that lesson, as I stood in that place. And I thought of the United Presbyterian Church in 1970, because in a very real way the National Staff of the Board of National Missions learned that hard lesson in Dallas - nothing great is accomplished without great risk. And in a real way - that is the lesson the 1970's are forcing the entire United Presbyterian Church to learn, and to learn quickly.

Jesus told a story about risk and its results. A man went away on a journey, and as he left he gave each of three servants money to be kept while he was gone. To the first servant he gave ten talents: Goodspeed tells us that a talent was worth thousand dollars - T.E.V. - \$5,000 total - a lot of money -- a lot of responsibility. And he took the money, invested it, traded with it and after a period of time had double the initial amount, a performance that would warm the heart of any eager capitalist. The second servant received five talents. He too invested his money and doubled it. Both men took a great risk: the money did not belong to them in the first place: by making it work they were taking the inevitable risk that they would lose it all.

The third servant received one talent - and promptly hid it in the ground. No risks there. The man really was very prudent - perhaps even admirable; he was taking no chances.

When the master returned he was delighted with the first two servants. "They," he said, "had been faithful", and he heaped on them lavish rewards. Now, that's a very curious definition of faithfulness - but that's how Jesus told the story.

The third servant - the one, I would suggest, we might be inclined to call faithful, because of his prudence, was rebuked - called "wicked, slothful", his one talent was taken away and he was cast into the outer darkness. All in all, his treatment was as harsh as any described in the New Testament. Faithfulness, Jesus was saying, is more a matter of spending - and taking chances, than saving and allowing to lie fallow with no risks at all.

The story ends here, but we are forced to speculate that had the one talent man invested his money, and lost it, his treatment would have been far less severe. That is, his misdeed - was not something he did - but something he was afraid to try.

There are a lot of meanings to be drawn from this. But I think there are important and very immediate meanings here for the Church of Jesus Christ as it goes about its work in this day. It's a tough time for the church, so tough, in fact, that some are saying we will never survive it.

The National Church finds itself today in the treacherous dilemma of having more and more demands placed upon it - by its own sense of responsibility, while at the same time watching its revenues and reserves decline at an alarming rate. Listen to these two sentences from the Report of the Budget Committee of the National Missions staff "In terms of real purchasing power, mission monies have declined so rapidly since 1965 (the peak year) that the amount available for 1971 has a purchasing power of approximately 60% of the 1965 figure.

Second, we consider that the cuts demanded will be severely damaging to the work of National Missions."

COEMAR? - listen to these lines from a letter dated July, 1970, Chongju, Korea, written by a friend of mine, Bob Urquhart - "This past May, we received word from the Commission in New York that our services under COEMAR would terminate with this furlough. Needless to say, this has precipitated some rather drastic changes of plans and thinking. We frankly do not know what God would have us do, but we are honestly trying to remain open to His leading wherever He may choose to put us. We would appreciate your earnest prayers that we will surely do Christ's will, whatever it may be."

What worries me about that last sentence is that the will of God may not be a factor here - because United Presbyterians are not providing the necessary funds. His future will be determined by financial necessity; not the will of God.

It's a tough time to be a church member and church supporter. We are deeply disturbed about the increasing militancy of our black and brown brothers, and their shrill insistence that we - here in the safety and sanctuary of central Indiana share the responsibility for racism and poverty. We are deeply disturbed because our church has made response to the new world of the 1970's, many times in ways which are repugnant to our personal political, economic and social preferences. But I think what disturbs us most of all is that we feel our beloved church going out on a limb, risking its corporate life for the sake of doing what it considers the priority items in God's agenda for his world, and we frankly, have a little trouble comprehending that.....

It's very tempting in this time to scurry for the safety of security: to get off the front line and out of the newspapers and away from all the risks. It's tempting to read our theology in the Indianapolis Star; to believe the Chicago Tribune rather than Presbyterian Life; to join the chorus of voices which - in the name of prudence and security - would have the United Presbyterian Church back away from issues like sexuality, and drugs, and the war.

Those three issues were confronted directly by our church this year. The General Assembly spoke - and the tremor is still felt. A consensus note of our constituents would probably have had us ignore all three issues - in that it is impossible to address any of them without aggravating a lot of people. It would be easier, simply, not to take the chance. It's very tempting - because - in a crassly fiscal idiom - to do so would be to receive more money, and therefore to invest in a safe and secure future for the church.

Well, allow me respectfully to suggest, that the will of God for his people - his church - us, if you will, - has very little to do with safety and prudence and security. I see, in our text, a strong and clear word about adventuresome churchmanship. I see here God calling his servant church to risk itself - to invest itself in the life of the world. I hear God speaking to congregations, urging us to use the formidable array of resources he has put at our disposal

for something other than our own safe future. I hear him speaking to you and me, as individual disciples - calling us to the excitement and adventure of investing and risking ourselves in his work, in his world.

In the final analysis, risk is related to love. A man will take risks for something or someone he loves. To love someone is to open oneself to the possibility of hurt. To love is to become suddenly vulnerable. Think of it in terms of children: to love a child is risky business. Because he's going to grow up - and that alone will hurt badly. He may not be what we plan for him - he may never accomplish the goals we have set: he may never say thank you for the sacrifice and effort. To love him is to risk gettin hurt.

The same is certainly true of romantic love: romantic involvements are really risky business, and having been hurt badly, we are inclined to say - "never again." But thank God, there is something deep within us that knows that to love and to risk is to be authentically human.

I think the life of the church depends directly on the amount of risks it is willing to take. In Jesus Christ God has called his church into a passionate love affair with the world. God has equipped the church with power and resources and people - and sent it out, in his name, to spend - to love - to risk.

C. S. Lewis summed it up in a beautiful paragraph I would like to share with you -

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and pertuba-

tions of love is Hell." [C. S. Lewis, The Four Loves]

I think that is precisely the meaning of the story Jesus told about the man who hid his money in the ground. I think that is precisely God's word to his church - and to us individually.

We are called to live out on the edge - to love other people - to stand with them and for them - to throw ourselves into causes we know are right. We are called to vulnerability - to take risks. And we are promised that there is authentic life in this style of discipleship: that anything less is a form of death.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the story of a risk. God sent his son, to be born of a peasant family, to live a common life, to present his case to his people - risking that the whole project would be ignored. God sent his son to be subject to the will of humanity - and the son was crucified. That's the kind of risks love takes.

Let us remember that, when we are tempted to scurry for security. Let us recall that God took that risk for us: that he has risked his will by laying it upon us to be carried out - or to be buried in the earth. As we go about the business of our lives this day - let us authentically celebrate the Good News of Jesus Christ by vowing again to put ourselves at his disposal: by embracing gladly the risks of discipleship - by going from this place to live in his name.

Amen.

Our Father - you have given us all we have and called us to spend it for the sake of the world. One thing we lack - the will, the courage - the willingness to risk ourselves. Give us that too, O God, and with it a new sense that there is true joy in living and spending extravagantly. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.